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SEARCHING FOR MEDIEVAL LESBIANISM AND “LESBIANISTIC INTIMACY”
WITHIN ASEXUAL CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS ORDERS OF THE MIDDLE AGES:
G. UNICE SUE ROSE AND C. SUPER MEL ET FAVUM DULCIORI

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Honors Western Civilization
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In Europe during the middle ages, one nun known as B. writes to a woman known as C. a love letter. “In you is all gentleness, all perfection... you are sweeter than milk and honey, you are peerless among thousands, I love you more than any.”¹ Yet another nun known as A. writes a different letter to a woman she calls only G., “When I remember the kisses you gave, and with what words of joy you caressed my little breasts, I want to die as I am not allowed to see you.”² These two letters, *G. unice sue rose* and *C. super mel et favum dulciori*, are preserved within the monastic manuscript of three hundred letters Clm 19411 (ca. 1160 CE - before 1180 CE) as part of the *Tegernseer Liebesbriefe* (Tegernsee Love Letters).³ While Clm 19411 originates from the Bavarian scriptorium and abbey of Tegernsee, scholars believe these two letters were written at “a women’s monastery in the region.”⁴ Within the letters there are religious references and allusions that require such a thorough knowledge of scripture that the logical conclusion is the penwomen were members of a religious order, specifically the reference within *G. unice sue rose*

¹ Peter Dronke, *Medieval Latin Love-Poetry*, vol. 2, in *Medieval Latin and the Rise of European Love-Lyric*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968). Translation of the anonymous love letter titled “C. super mel et favum dulciori,” 479. For the full text of the letter, see Appendix 1.

² Peter Dronke, *Medieval Latin Love-Poetry*, 481. Translation of another anonymous love letter titled “G. unice sue rose.” For the full text of the letter, see Appendix 2.

³ Peter Dronke, *Medieval Latin Love Poetry*, 566 (See Bibliographic entry); Barbara Newman, “Love Letters from Tegernsee,” *Making Love in the Twelfth Century: “Letters of Two Lovers” in Context*. (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 229-56. <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/stable/j.ctt1btc5ws.7>. The *Tegernseer Liebesbriefe* refers to the eleven letters in Clm 19411 written by women about love and friendship.

⁴ Ann Matter, “My Sister, My Spouse: Women-Identified Women in Medieval Christianity,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol 2, no 2 (1986): 81-93. <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/stable/25002043>. See espec. page 82.

to the obscure biblical prophet Habakkuk,⁵ the eighth of the twelve minor prophets of the Holy Bible.⁶ This, in addition to the religious origin of both letters, cause scholars to identify the women as religious women or “lesbian nuns.”⁷ Yet traditional medievalists reject lesbianistic interpretations of medieval women’s art, literature, and mystical texts. They believe medieval lesbianism scholars, in the words of Caroline Bynum, “too readily sexualize medieval somatic experiences and expressions,” maternity, and *amicitia*.⁸ However, while some scholars in medieval lesbianism recognize *G. unice sue rose* and *C. super mel et favum dulciori* as

⁵ As spelled in Dronke’s translation.

⁶ Hab. in *The Holy Bible, translated from the Latin Vulgate; diligently compared with the Hebrew, Greek, and other editions in various languages...* Translated by Richard Challoner. (Philadelphia: John Kelly & Sons, 1873); Achtemeier, Elizabeth. "Habakkuk, The Book of." In *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*. : Oxford University Press., 1993. DOI: [10.1093/acref/9780195046458.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195046458.001.0001); "Habakkuk, Book of." In *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, edited by Cross, F. L., and E. A. Livingstone. : Oxford University Press., 2005. DOI: [10.1093/acref/9780192802903.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780192802903.001.0001). Mentioned only a handful of times outside of his Book of Prophecies and an obscure biblical person, Habakkuk was the eighth of the twelve minor prophets of the Holy Bible and experienced a vision of God coming down from Mount Paran in deliverance of his people.

⁷ Ann E. Matter, “My Sister, My Spouse”, 82-84; Jacqueline Murray. “Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible: Lesbians in the Middle Ages,” in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1996), 191-222; John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p 220-221. Specifically such scholars as Ann Matter, Jacqueline Murray, John Boswell and Peter Dronke (Ann E. Matter, “My Sister, My Spouse”, 82-84).

⁸ Judith Bennett, ““Lesbian-Like” and the Social History of Lesbianisms,” 8; James McEvoy, "Notes on the Prologue of St. Aelred of Rievaulx's 'de Spirituali Amicitia,' With A Translation," *Traditio* 37 (1981), 396-411. <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/stable/27831101>. *Amicitia* refers to *amicitia spiritualis*, the term for spiritual friendship used and created by Aelred of Rievaulx (110-1167 CE) within his *De Spirituali Amicitia*.

homoerotic or homoaffective, they ignore the coexistence of the letters and the women who wrote them within religious orders hostile to sexuality. The anonymous letters, with their blatant expression of sexual and non-sexual intimacy between two sets of nuns, are prime exemplars of both medieval lesbianism within asexual religious orders of medieval Western Europe and the need for the term “lesbianistic intimacy” within historical scholarship because of the historical inadequacy and essentialist impropriety of the current terms.

Any legitimate analysis of the Tegernsee letters must avoid essentialism⁹ through the application of a social constructionist¹⁰ framework that considers both the accepted medieval antisexuality and the foundation of medieval relationships. The study of medieval sexuality can be broadly split into two distinct analytic frameworks that shape and inform all scholarly conclusions: essentialism and social constructionism.¹¹ The essentialist analytic framework is intrinsically defective because, unlike what essentialists claim, sexuality and sexual orientation aren't innate to human nature. Rather, the different social structures and cultures of different

⁹ Essentialism holds sexuality and sexual orientation innate to human nature, anachronously ignoring crucial distinctions between societies in different times. Under essentialism, the studies of medieval and modern sexuality needn't be differentiated by more than the consequences of how the medieval society reacted towards sexualities, since sexual orientation is a constant thread that runs through human history regardless of the differences between cultures and societies. Any assertions made through the framework of essentialism rightfully falls prey to the criticism of anachronism and illegitimacy.

¹⁰ Social constructionism functions on the foundational belief that sexual identity and individual sexual identification are completely dominated by and rooted in the cultural and social structures of a time period and place.

¹¹ Jacqueline Murray, “Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible,” 1. The two fundamental perspectives, essentialism and social constructionism, are pointed out and summarized by Murray in the beginning of her article. Her explanation of such has been paraphrased, yet the notice of these two approaches has been noted by the author of this paper outside of Murray's article.

times, places, and people make an essential, sexual truth impossible; if the antithetical perceptions of science between the medieval and modern periods arise from differences in theology and other such structures, then logically the same must be true regarding sexuality and sexual orientations. Thus, any legitimate contributions by medievalists must follow social constructionism and consider both the medieval treatment and constitution of sexual orientations within the accepted historiographical understanding of medieval Europe.¹²

Therefore, recognizing the medieval antisexuality depicted by theological evidence is crucial when analyzing *G. unice sue rose* and *C. super mel et favum dulciori*. Theological evidence depicts an ecclesiastical hostility towards sexuality that strictly regimented both lay and ecclesiastic lives, limiting sexual activities to the Christian moral perspective and philosophy. Under such a perspective, sex was reserved solely for marital procreation; any other manifestation of the carnal desires of the flesh was a perversion of God's work.¹³ Thus, homosexual acts and the more general action of sodomy, with an inherent inability to facilitate procreation, were deemed sinful.¹⁴ The punishments, or penances, awarded for sexual acts were

¹² Jacqueline Murray. "Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible;" Judith M Bennett, "'Lesbian-Like' and the Social History of Lesbianisms," in *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 9 no. ½ (2000), 1-24. <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/stable/3704629>; Ann Matter, "My Sister, My Spouse," 81-93. As seen in the works of Ann Campbell, Jacqueline Murray, Judith Bennett and others.

¹³ Jean-Louis Flandrin, Charles-Marie de La Roncière, and Monica Chiellini Nari, "Sexuality," in *Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages*. James Clarke & Co, 2002. DOI: [10.1093/acref/9780227679319.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780227679319.001.0001).

¹⁴ Arno Karlen, *Sexuality and Homosexuality: A New View*, New York: WW Norton, 1971. See esp. Chap. 4 "The Christian Bedrock" and Chap. 5 "The Capital Sin." Warren Johansson and William A. Percy, "Homosexuality," in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern Bullough and James A. Brundage, (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1996), 155-189.

described in theological codes such as the Penitentials and *summae confessorum*,¹⁵ which almost obsessively detailed the punishments for fornication, homosexuality, and sodomy between men while usually ignoring female homosexuality as sodomy and a less worrisome offense.¹⁶ The antisexual dictates of the middle ages further restricted members of religious orders, however, with celibacy imposed upon them through continence,¹⁷ chastity vows, and penitential codes forbidding clerical sexuality such as the *Penitential of Theodore* (668-690 CE) and Burchard of Worms' *Decretum* (ca. 1008 CE).¹⁸ Medieval hostility towards non-procreative and clerical

¹⁵ Pierre A. Payer, "Confession and the Study of Sex," in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage, (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1996), 3-31. Payer chronologically separates the two "guides for confessors," with the era of the penitentials consisting of the sixth to the eleventh century (although he recognizes that penitentials were written and copied through the twelfth century) and the time of the *summae confessorum* (summas for confessors), guides that "placed less emphasis on particularizing sins and on enumerating specific tariffs for specific sins," from the late twelfth century through the rest of the Middle Ages. While Clm 19411 has been dated circa 1160 CE and before 1186 CE, this paper focuses upon the penitentials rather than the summas on the basis that the summas were not popular practice at the time of the manuscript's writing. As such, even if *G. unice sue rose* and *C. super mel et favum dulciori* were written immediately preceding Clm 19411's creation, the authors of the letters were likely to be under domain of penitentials.

¹⁶ Ann E. Matter, "My Sister, My Spouse," 88; Michael Goodich, "Homosexuality," in *Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages*. James Clarke & Co, 2002. DOI: [10.1093/acref/9780227679319.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780227679319.001.0001).

¹⁷ Abstinence from sexual pleasure.

¹⁸ Jacqueline Murray, "Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible," 194-198; Arno Karlen, *Sexuality and Homosexuality*, 80; John Thomas McNeill and Helena Margaret Gamer, *Medieval Handbooks of Penance: A Translation of the Principal Libri Poenitentiales and Selections from Related Documents*. Records of Western Civilization, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991). See the section titled "VIII. Of Various Failings of the Servants of God" of "The Penitential of Theodore", 184-186. -While some theological writings such as the *Regula ad Virginea* of Bishop Donatus of Besançon (ca. 800 CE) and a letter by Augustine to a nunnery (ca. 423 CE) specifically covered clerical female homosexuality, most penitentials did not. As such, the *Decretum* of Bishop Burchard of Worms (c. 1008 CE), the *Penitential of Bede* (c. 700 CE), and *The Penitential of Theodore* (668-690 CE) are the only Western penitentials directly addressing female clerical homosexuality.

sexual activities created religious orders characterized by an antisexuality akin to asexuality, yet despite this members could and did have relationships with each other and other people. This was possible because most medieval relationships didn't rely on sex and sexual intimacy, rather, medieval relationships were founded upon emotional and spiritual intimacy since in an antisexual society, sexual attraction was largely inconsequential.

However, despite the perceived asexuality of religious orders, the letter *G. unice sue rose* contains irrefutable evidence of sexual and non-sexual medieval lesbianism. In fact, John Boswell has called the letter "perhaps the most outstanding example of medieval lesbian literature,"¹⁹ most likely due in part to A.'s remark towards her lover G., "I remember the kisses you gave, and with what words of joy you caressed my little breasts." As Peter Dronke says, this line "seems to presuppose a passionate physical relationship" and sexual intimacy between the two women.²⁰ During the Middle Ages, where nightly emissions and mere thoughts of fornication demanded punishment for their sinful and perverse sexual nature,²¹ such a recounting of kisses and caresses of breasts was graphic and hypersexual, especially within the asexual religious orders of the time period. In addition to the explicit sexual intimacy detailed, the description of emotional yearning and overarching discontentedness on the part of A. provides evidence of a homoaffective and homoromantic relationship, as she writes:

Is my strength that of stones that I should wait for your return, I who do not cease to ache night and day, like one who lacks both hand and foot? Without you all that's joyous and

¹⁹ John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, quoted in Ann Matter, "My Sister, My Spouse," 82.

²⁰ Peter Dronke, *Medieval Latin Love-Poetry*, 481.

²¹ John Thomas McNeill and Helena Margaret Gamer, *Medieval Handbooks of Penance*, 184-186 fornication.

delightful becomes like mud trodden underfoot, instead of rejoicing I shed tears, my spirit never appears joyful. ... For in the world there is no woman born so loveable, so dear, one who loves me without feigning, with such deep love. ... While the world lasts you'll never be effaced from the centre of my heart.²²

The absence of G. crippled A. and made A. incapable of experiencing life's pleasures, feeling only the pain and depression that accompanies the absence of something or someone inherent to oneself. In addition to this dependency, the letter contains frequent endearments such as "sweet love," "one-and-only rose," "bond of precious love," and the pledge from A. to G. that "while the world lasts you'll never be effaced from the centre of my heart." These, particularly the depressive effect of G.'s absence and the permanence of A's pledge, cast an abnormal - by the historical heteronormative standard - emotional dependence, intimacy, and devotion between herself and G. that transgresses the bounds of religion, friendship, or family in a fashion inexplicably lesbian-esque in nature. In combination with the overtly sexual intimacy described in the letter, *G. unice sue rose* diverges from the asexual theological philosophies, ecclesiastical celibacy, and asexual doctrines that the Church placed on religious women.

Although without the explicit homoerotica of *G. unice sue rose*, *C. super mel et favum dulciori* also contains clear romantic and personal intimacy characteristic of medieval lesbianism. The letter, addressed "To C—, sweeter than honey or honeycomb, B— sends all the love there is to her love," bemoans the absence of the beloved C.:

Why do you want your only one to die, who, as you know, loves you with soul and body, who sighs for you at every hour, at every moment, like a hungry little bird... as the turtle-dove, having lost its mate, perches forever on its little dried-up branch, so I lament endlessly until I shall enjoy your trust again...if I could buy your life with the price of mine, (I'd do it) instantly for you are the only woman I have chosen according to my heart.²³

²² Peter Dronke, *Medieval Latin Love-Poetry*, 481.

²³ Peter Dronke, *Medieval Latin Love-Poetry*, 479.

Powerful in the pain and passion expressed, these words “bespeak a depth of relationship that transcends that prescribed for spiritual sisters” and it is this depth that makes the women’s relationship and B’s love prohibited and heretical.²⁴ B. loving C. with her body implicates a physicality - be it sexual or non-sexual in nature - to their relationship prohibited by the theological literatures and the Church.²⁵ To that end, for B. to love C. with her soul is heretical, since the medieval common belief was that the soul was supposed to love only God. Therefore for B. to love C. with her soul is for B. to seemingly place the other woman above or equal to God, an extremely heretical notion. The comparison is corroborated by the clear expressions of the women’s love in the comparison of B.’s anguish and lamentation over C.’s absence to the grief of the turtle dove, a bird of love, mourning the death of its life mate; in such lines as “I could find nothing now that I could compare to your love, sweet beyond honey and honeycomb, compared with which the brightness of gold and silver is tarnished,” “You alone are my love and longing, you the sweet cooling of my mind,” and “In you is all gentleness, all perfection.”²⁶ The expressions of love, devotion, passion and pain within and between the lines of *C. super mel et favum dulciori* presuppose a homoromantic or homoaffective relationship within the antisexual religious order that the penwoman belonged to.

²⁴ Jacqueline Murray, “Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible,” 207.

²⁵ Jacqueline Murray, “Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible,” 196. See the discussion of Donatus of Besançon and his *Regula ad Virginea*.

²⁶ Peter Dronke, *Medieval Latin Love-Poetry*, 479.

While an analysis of *G. unice sue rose* and *C. super mel et favum dulciori* yields undeniable evidence of lesbianesque relationships within religious orders, traditional medievalists are reluctant and even outright refuse to recognize medieval lesbianic relationships. Caroline Bynum “resolutely sees maternity where same-sex affections might, in fact, have been in play.”²⁷ Even Peter Dronke and John Boswell, while recognizing the passion within the letters, “are careful to set it within the sophisticated and venerable tradition of spiritual friendship ...*amicitia*.”²⁸ The refusal and hesitancy of scholars to recognize medieval lesbianism stems from the phallogentric, heteronormative and male foundations of the medieval theological literature and the theological philosophy of reproductive sex.²⁹ This theological philosophy and the phallogentric conceptualization of sex held no place for female homosexuality outside of masturbation unless penetration by a woman upon another woman occurred, threatening the male

²⁷ Judith Bennett, ““Lesbian-Like” and the Social History of Lesbianisms,” 8.

²⁸ Ann Matter, “My Sister, My Spouse,” 84.

²⁹ Joyce E. Salisbury, “Gendered Sexuality,” in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality* ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage, (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1996), 81-102; Arno Karlen, *Sexuality and Homosexuality*; Warren Johansson and William A. Percy, “Homosexuality,” 155-189; Judith Bennett, ““Lesbian-Like” and the Social History of Lesbianisms,” 1-24. Medieval theological literature asserted that sex and sexual activities were only accepted for the biological necessity of procreation, which this paper addresses as the “theological reproductive philosophy of sex”. Most scholarship on medieval sexuality relies upon this. Joyce Salisbury, while asserting a biological approach to gendering sexuality in the middle ages, bases all of her declarations, assignments and definitions of female sexuality upon the reproductive purposes presented in theological literature and philosophy. Karlen based his study of medieval homosexuality and homophobia within and concerning the Christian Church upon the Augustinian philosophy of concupiscence and original sin. Warren Johansson and William A. Percy work from the theological philosophy that homosexuality was “sinning against nature” by the performance of sexual acts with no reproductive purpose. Medieval lesbianism scholars such as John Boswell, Harry Kuster, Raymond Cormier and Joan Cadden base their analyses, commentary and arguments upon the theological reproductive importance of sexuality.

prerogative. As a result, medieval women's sexuality marginalizes medieval lesbianism and lesbianesque relationships - and thus the Tegernsee letters - under the study of medieval homosexuality for the lack of reproductive potential in these relationships. Similarly, the male prerogative of medieval theology³⁰ leads medieval homosexuality, a field dominated by clerical examples of male homosexuality, to marginalize female homosexuality by classifying it within the purview of female sexuality. The result is, as Jacqueline Murray titles her article, that lesbianism within the middle ages is "twice invisible" and "twice marginalized" both within the middle ages and within medieval scholarship on sexuality.³¹

While attempting to recognize the voices of the cautious and marginalized medieval lesbians³² and provide more than merely another study of the antiquated heteronormative medieval status quo, medieval lesbianism scholars typically turn to criminal accusations,³³

³⁰ See Jacqueline Murray, "Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible," 197-198; Ann Matter, "My Sister, My Spouse," 88-90. Theological literature, such as the penitentials, focused heavily upon fornication with and or among men and paid very little attention to fornication, specifically homosexuality, between two women. While penances for "sexual acts between men are given in almost obsessive detail," there are "only a few comments about lesbian acts" (Ann Matter, "My Sister, My Spouse," 88). See the comparison of penances within the *Penitential of Theodore* in Murray's article on page 197.

³¹ Jacqueline Murray, "Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible," 191-222.

³² There is much debate around using the term "lesbian," which will be discussed later. At this point in the paper, however, the simple, if anachronistic, term "lesbian" will be used to describe women who experienced or are believed to have experienced homosexual or homoromantic desires.

³³ See also Judith Bennett, "'Lesbian-Like' and the Social History of Lesbianisms," 1-24. In addition to her exploration of her term "lesbian-like," Bennett also asserts that a true social history of medieval lesbianisms can only be attained by medievalists through criminal accusations. She as such approaches medieval lesbianism through records to construct a social history of case studies, an approach also taken by other articles of scholarship. However, such an approach is not relevant within the context of this paper and so it will not be explored nor analyzed further.

theological literature and philosophy,³⁴ artistic representations, and women's literature³⁵ for instances of medieval lesbianism. From these ventures, medievalists such as Bruce Holsinger, Ulrike Wiethaus, and Mary Ann Campbell,³⁶ and others³⁷ have found religious medieval lesbianism within the songs of Hildegard von Bingen, the pious literature of Hadewijch of Brabant, the text of *Hali Meidhad*, and the letters between Hildegard von Bingen and Richardis von Stade.³⁸

Yet in addition to proving the existence of medieval lesbianism within asexual orders, *G. unice sue rose* and *C. super mel et favum dulciori* reveal the failures of the field of medieval lesbianism. The by-product of the phallogentric and theological medieval history is the

³⁴ The merits of this approach are discussed later in this paper.

³⁵ Artistic representations mean such things as mystical texts, songs, and art of suspected religious women of the middle ages. Women's literature includes such things as the anonymous letters within the Tegernsee manuscript, the writings of Hildegard of Bingen and Hadewijch. Since both approaches rely upon an examination of women's voice, they will be discussed in this paper together under the title of "women's art."

³⁶ Bruce Holsinger, "The Flesh of the Voice: Embodiment and the Homoerotics of Devotion in the Music of Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)," *Signs*, vol. 19, no. 1 (University of Chicago Press, 1995), 92-125, <https://www-jstor-org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/stable/3174746>; Judith Bennett, "'Lesbian-Like' and the Social History of Lesbianisms," 7-8.

³⁷ Other scholars who have approached medieval lesbianism through women's art include Ann Matter (Ann E. Matter, "My Sister, My Spouse," 82-86), Jacqueline Murray (Jacqueline Murray, "Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible," 191-222), Kathy Lavezzo (Judith Bennett, "'Lesbian-Like' and the Social History of Lesbianisms," 7-8), Maggie Benware (Maggie A. Benware, "Lesbians in the Middle Ages: Bietris de Romans." (2017). Young Historians Conference. 10.<http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/younghistorians/2017/oralpres/10>), and Susan Crane (Judith Bennett, "'Lesbian-Like' and the Social History of Lesbianisms," 7-8).

³⁸ Jacqueline Murray, "Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible," 207; Ulrike Wiethaus, "In Search of Medieval Women's Friendships: Hildegard of Bingen's Letters to Her Female Contemporaries," in *Maps of Flesh and Light. The Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics*, ed. Ulrike Wiethaus (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 98-106.

marginalization of religious lesbians³⁹ and the schism within medieval lesbianism of classifying what defines medieval lesbianism: sexual orientation and intimacy, or lifestyle and affection. Medievalists of the sexuality camp require that women acted upon and fulfilled “their homosexual desires”⁴⁰ through genital contact or sexual intimacy in order to be identified as a medieval lesbian, reminiscent of the penitentials and traditional medievalists. This sexual orientation and activity lens, when applied to religious lesbians, causes medievalists to egregiously simplify clerical lesbianism to mere erotic homosexuality as seen in the work of medievalists like Judith Bennett,⁴¹ Maggie Benware, and Bruce Holsinger.⁴² Judith Bennett and Maggie Benware, in particular, ignore any homoaffection that may be present to note merely the overtly sexual phrases or tone within women’s art as proof of clerical lesbianism.⁴³ The lifestyle and affection classifier group, which the field of medieval lesbianism moves towards, conversely ignores sexuality to focus upon the homoaffection of medieval lesbians and their lifestyle, such

³⁹ There is much debate around using the term “lesbian,” which will be discussed later. At this point in the paper, however, the simple, if anachronistic, term “lesbian” will be used to describe women who experienced or are believed to have experienced homosexual or homoromantic desires.

⁴⁰ Maggie Benware, “Lesbians in the Middle Ages: Bietris de Romans,” 1.

⁴¹ Within the overall field of medieval lesbianism, Judith Bennett would be classified as an emotional intimacy or lifestyle medievalist (more on this later). However, when discussing medieval lesbianism when applied to religious women, Bennett only acknowledges the sexual reasonings for the classification.

⁴² Bruce Holsinger, “The Flesh of the Voice: Embodiment and the Homoerotics of Devotion in the Music of Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179),” 92-125; Judith Bennett, ““Lesbian-Like” and the Social History of Lesbianisms,” 1, 4-5; Maggie A. Benware, “Lesbians in the Middle Ages: Bietris de Romans,” 2-3.

⁴³ Judith Bennett, ““Lesbian-Like” and the Social History of Lesbianisms,” 1, 4-5; Maggie A. Benware, “Lesbians in the Middle Ages: Bietris de Romans,” 2-3.

as breaking social norms dictated by heteronormativity, misogyny, and the male prerogative.

These scholars, such as Ann Matter and Jacqueline Murray, recognize the emotional relationships between medieval religious women yet consistently conclude that such relationships were “not taken seriously except insofar as it threatened male privilege or the natural hierarchy of gender.”

44

Such controversy over the existence, classification and consideration of medieval lesbians has given rise to multiple terms beyond the anachronistically modern terms “lesbian” and “homosexual.” The term “lesbian” carries not only modern controversies but anachronism; as Bennett explains:

no one is really sure what “lesbian” means. Are lesbians born or made? Do lesbians delight in sex with women exclusively or can the term encompass those who enjoy sex with men as well as women? What defines lesbian sex...might sexual practice be less determinative of lesbianism than *desire* for women, *primary love* for women...or even *political* commitment to women.... Nevertheless, the ever-changing contemporary meanings of “lesbian” have often been belied by a persistent assumption of a core lesbian identity...the use of “lesbian” to describe women before the late nineteenth century reeks of ahistoricism.⁴⁵

By these same points the term “homosexual” to describe a sexual orientation or person is similarly anachronistic, and avoided within the field. With the inability to use “lesbian” and “homosexual” by lesbian medievalists, different terms have been suggested and used within the field. However, the current terms in use within the field of medieval lesbianism, such as Adrienne Rich’s “lesbian continuum”⁴⁶ and Judith Bennett’s “lesbian-like,” are problematically

⁴⁴ Jacqueline Murray, “Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible,” 199.

⁴⁵ Judith Bennett, ““Lesbian-Like” and the Social History of Lesbianisms,” 10-11. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁶ Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” in *Signs* 5, no. 4, (1980) : 648-9. <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/stable/3173834>.

based upon the too inclusive and essentialistic determiner of lifestyle. “Lesbian continuum” suggests a transhistorical lesbian identity encompassing an enormously broad scope. Adrienne Rich defines “lesbian continuum” to “include a range—through each women's life and throughout history—of women-identified experience” encompassing the “sharing of a rich inner life,” marriage resistance, lesbian sadomasochism, maternal nurturance, and “a woman reluctant to yield to wooing.”⁴⁷ Such a term thus covers classifiers based upon a woman’s lifestyle unrelated to women’s relationships but also an aspect of social resistance that belongs more to the nineteenth through twenty first centuries than the middle ages. Although some scholars use the term, labelling all women-identified experiences upon a lesbian continuum is casting an enormously wide transhistorical lesbian identity net and could lead to distorted, essentialist labeling and application of lesbianism within the middle ages.

Similarly, Bennett’s term “lesbian-like” lends itself to an essentialist and broad approach. “Lesbian-like,” Bennett argues, is “a hyphenated construction that both ... articulates the often-unnamed ... [and] decenters [sic] “lesbian,” introducing into historical research a productive uncertainty born of likeness and resemblance, not identity.” The grounds for her term, Bennett asserts, is a desire to “incorporate into lesbian history women who ... lived in ways that offer certain affinities with modern lesbians,” and “our modern need for a useable past ... that can link our many lives with the histories of those long dead.”⁴⁸ While some medievalists have accepted Bennett’s term, what they and Bennett fail to realize is the transhistorical nature of the term, implicating a central aspect of lesbianism that transcends social structures, culture, and

⁴⁷ Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” 648-9.

⁴⁸ Judith Bennett, ““Lesbian-Like” and the Social History of Lesbianisms,” 14.

time periods to link the medieval to the modern experience and sexuality. To label such medieval women as “lesbian-like” for lifestyle choices like social resistance, cross dressing, prostitution, singleness, or “flouted norms of sexual propriety”⁴⁹ is characteristic more of a feminist rebellion against heteronormativity rather than female same-sex desires, intimacy, and affection, lending itself only to an unsuitable analysis of the middle ages. For this reason, this paper argues that medievalists should reject “lesbian-like” for its essentialistic philosophy and scope.

From a focus on women relationships extending beyond maternal love or spiritual friendship to encompass both sexual and romantic orientation, this paper presents medieval studies the term lesbianistic intimacy. Unlike previous terms, lesbianistic intimacy finds definition not through characteristics of modern sexuality but within historical accounts of affection, love, and intimacy like that within *G. unice sue rose* and *C. super mel et favum dulciori*. “Lesbianistic” reflects not only the historical foundations of recognizing women identified relationships, such as the female homosexuality and homoromantism expressed by Sappho of Lesbos and the sexual acts performed by the people of Lesbos,⁵⁰ but the resemblance and characteristics of such relationships—dependency, intimacy, affection, attachment, romance, as well as sexual attractions between women—between the distinct time periods; between antiquity and the middle ages, and even the English Renaissance.⁵¹ Therefore, lesbianistic

⁴⁹ Judith Bennett, ““Lesbian-Like” and the Social History of Lesbianisms,” 15.

⁵⁰ Paula Blank, “The Proverbial “Lesbian”: Queering Etymology in Contemporary Critical Practice,” in *Modern Philology* 109, no. 1 (2011): 108. DOI: [10.1086/661977](https://doi.org/10.1086/661977).

⁵¹ Judith Bennett, ““Lesbian-Like” and the Social History of Lesbianisms,” 11-12. Bennett shows a historical thread of the term “lesbian” throughout history, including by the Byzantine commentator Arethas with women same-sex relations and the use of the term in England as early as the 1730s. Despite this, however, the rejection of the term “lesbian” by itself

intimacy evades accusations of modern anachronism while acknowledging and validating both homosaffection and homoerotica between medieval women, both common and religious.

“Intimacy” allows for an application and characterization of the term to be more narrowly and accurately focused upon the emotions, affections, interactions, rapport, companionship, attachment, dependency, romance, spiritual,⁵² and sexual aspects of relationships between women. Lesbianistic intimacy includes any non-sexual aspect of women identified relationships, for anything less marginalizes medieval women and corrupts medieval studies and history.

The suggestion of the term “lesbianistic intimacy” by this paper rests in the assertion that the scholarship on medieval sexuality, specifically medieval lesbianism, must be taken further. Helmut Puff said in his article “Same-Sex Possibilities” that “rather than ask whether particular relationships involved genital contact...we need to recognize that eroticism would be present in many different ways.”⁵³ However, rather than recognizing merely eroticism, medievalists need to recognize not only the homoerotic *and* homoaffective tones of medieval women but also their coexistence within religious orders, such as that seen through a critical examination of *G. unice sue rose* and *C. super mel et favum dulciori*.

and within Bennett’s terminology stands due to the nature of their connotations and definitions relying upon the modern usage and meaning.

⁵² The spiritual component of lesbianistic intimacy differs from the *amicitia* that is well known within the ecclesiastical history of the middle ages and the scholarship of those medievalists who do not recognize lesbianistic intimacy between ecclesiastics.

⁵³ Helmut Puff, “Same-Sex Possibilities,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, ed. Judith M Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras, (Oxford: Oxford Clarrington Press, 2013), 385.

What is really needed within the field is the analysis of not only theological dictates and women's art but specifically the examination and questioning of lesbianistic intimacy between women within the society that theological literature presents. It is necessarily true that any legitimate theory must be rooted within the current understanding of the middle ages, but it does not require blind acceptance. Our current understanding of medieval history is intrinsically flawed by accepting the thoughts of theologians and canonists as "representing a broad medieval reality" rather than "represent[ing] their sex, their education, their class privilege, and their professional contexts."⁵⁴ The thoughts of these theological men, however common they may be within surviving theological literature, don't prove a medieval popular attitude towards sexuality but merely what Vern Bullough calls the "attempts of the Christian church to impose its will upon a society."⁵⁵

Nowhere does a scholar explore not only the existence and extent of lesbianistic intimacy and desires within the Church and other Christian religious orders, but the implications of such. Using each letter as a culture of the lesbianistic relation, there appears to be little risk for the women since the lack of penetrative sex circumvents sodomy charges. Yet for these women, the discovery of these letters carried risks of ostracization, shame, penance, and punishments from the Church, including expulsion from the order for the heresy and sexual and nonsexual intimacy of their letters. The sexual intimacy of *G. unice sue rose* and the non-sexual lesbianistic intimacy within both letters violated religious celibacy and, as in the case of *C. super mel et favum*

⁵⁴ Judith M Bennett, "'Lesbian-Like' and the Social History of Lesbianisms," 6.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Ann Matter, "My Sister, My Spouse: Women-Identified Women in Medieval Christianity," 87.

dulciori, was heretical.⁵⁶ Additionally, the Tegernsee abbots were themselves subject to penance over the inclusion in the Clm 19411 manuscript, for by including the letter in Clm 19411 they were, according to the *Penitential of Theodore*, encouraging “the heresy of these people... as the Lord saith: ‘He that is not with me is against me.’”⁵⁷ So then why were *G. unice sue rose* and *C. super mel et favum dulciori* included within Clm 19411? If the theology and relative “lack” of evidence about medieval lesbianism points towards an asexual if heteronormative and male dominated society, then why are there lesbianistic intimacy within the letters of the Tegernsee manuscript, mystical texts, and art? What does the survival and, as in the case of Clm 19411, preservation and copying of such anti-heteronormative art, experiences, and texts say about the real societal perspective and treatment of homosexuality and lesbianism? Is the current comprehension of medieval reality wrong? Was lesbianism and lesbianistic intimacy in medieval religious orders more common than theological literature implies, more accepted within religious orders?

These are the questions that *G. unice sue rose*, *C. super mel et favum dulciori*, and “lesbianistic intimacy” ask of medievalists, questions requiring further study and contemplation by the field over the dichotomy between the asexual and fiercely heteronormative Church doctrines and the evidence of ecclesiastical lesbianistic intimacy from these letters and other religious women, such as Hadewijch and Hildegard von Bingen.

⁵⁶ While there is no clear proof within *C. super mel et favum dulciori* that B. and C. had any physical, sexual aspect of their relationship nor is there any evidence of marriage within either letter, the lesbianistic intimacy and devotion evident within the letters supports the argument that B. and C., and A. and G., were tied in a romantical and or emotional equivalent to marriage.

⁵⁷ John Thomas McNeill and Helena Margaret Gamer, *Medieval Handbooks of Penance*, 1991, 188 heresy.

Appendix 1

C. super mel et favum dulciori

To C—, sweeter than honey or honeycomb, B— sends all the love there is to her love. You who are unique and special, why do you make delay so long, so far away? Why do you want your only one to die, who, as you know, loves you with soul and body, who sighs for you at every hour, at every moment, like a hungry little bird. Since I've had to be without your sweetest presence, I have not wished to hear or see any other human being, but as the turtle-dove, having lost its mate, perches forever on its little dried-up branch, so I lament endlessly till I shall enjoy your trust again. I look about and do not find my lover—she does not comfort me even with a single word. Indeed, when I reflect on the loveliness of your most joyful speech and aspect, I am utterly depressed, for I find nothing now that I could compare with your love, sweet beyond honey and honeycomb, compared with which the brightness of gold and silver is tarnished. What more? In you is all gentleness, all perfection, so my spirit languishes perpetually by your absence. You are devoid of all the gall of any faithlessness, you are sweeter than milk and honey, you are peerless among thousands, I love you more than any. You alone are my love and longing, you the sweet cooling of my mind, no joy for me anywhere without you. All that was delightful with you is wearisome and heavy without you. So I truly want to tell you, if I could buy your life for the price of mine, (I'd do it) instantly, for you are the only woman I have chosen according to my heart. Therefore I always beseech God that bitter death may not come to me before I enjoy the dearly desired sight of you again. Farewell. Have of me all the faith and love there is. Accept the writing I send, and with it my constant mind.

Appendix 2

G. unice sue rose

To G—, her one-and-only rose, from A— the bond of precious love. What strength I have, that I may bear it, that I may have patience while you are gone? Is my strength that of stones that I should wait for your return, I who do not cease to ache night and day, like one who lacks both hand and foot? Without you all that's joyous and delightful becomes like mud trodden underfoot, instead of rejoicing I shed tears, my spirit never becomes joyful. When I remember the kisses you gave, and with what words of joy you caressed my little breasts, I want to die as I am not allowed to see you. What shall I, unhappiest, do? where shall I, the poorest, turn? Oh if my body had been consigned to the earth till your longed-for return, or if Habakkuk's trance-journey were granted me, that i might once come to see my lover's face—then I'd not care if in that hour I should die! For in the world there is no woman born so lovable, so dear, one who loves me without feigning, with such deep love. So I shall not cease to feel the endless pain till I win the sight of you again. Indeed, as a certain wise man says, it is a great misery for a man not to be with that which he cannot be. While the world lasts you'll never be effaced from the centre of my heart. Why say more? Return, sweet love! Do not delay your journey longer, know that I cannot bear your absence longer. Farewell, remember me.

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